

The Thermidorian Reaction and the Fate of Jacobins

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Abstract

The article will focus on existence of the Jacobins and their influence in France after 28th July 1794, including the fate of their supporters, ex-Terrorists, sans-culottes and Jacobin clubs. It will mainly focus on two aspects: excluding the Jacobins from political and social life in Thermidorian France (July 1794 – October 1795). The text will successively discuss the Conventional purges, removal of sans-culottes from provincial political arenas and their social isolation, issues with poor distributing of rations and consequent uprisings, dissolving of the Jacobin clubs across the country, mass releasing of alleged suspects and at the same time imprisoning political enemies, subsequent prison massacres, installing new supporters of the regime and overall institutional changes in new, cleansed France.

Key words: Jacobins, Thermidorian Reaction, Convention, French Revolution, 1794.

Introduction

The execution of Maximilien Robespierre is probably the most famous scene of the French Revolution. But this act, in which much more people were executed, was *not* in fact the end. Same atrocities and cruelties had occurred in a period following the execution of the most prominent Jacobins and not many authors incline to tell this story. Fortunately, there are some exceptions that are worth mentioning.

Since this article will mainly focus on political and social life from which the Jacobins were excluded, the political history and social history are the main methods used for this work. There are only few major figures dealing with this era: while republican Jules Michelet ended the Revolution with Robespierre's execution, the liberalism of Adolphe Thiers ventured far beyond July 1794 and was accompanied by Alphonse Aulard's republican and anticlerical view on the bourgeois class in the course of the Reaction. The more leftist and social view on low-classes is provided by Louis Blanc whose narration pays attention to situation in the départements and the Jacobin clubs themselves.

Mette Harder's insight to Conventional functioning and purges that followed deserves a special notion. Furthermore, with Laura Mason's exquisite works and with Stephen Miller's and Noah Shusterman's fresh approaches to old challenges we have a chance to look at the social stratification: how sans-culottes, a low-class, were repressed until being slowly dissipated among others and replaced by wealthier supporters of the regime. Constitutional details provided by Jean-Baptiste Duvergier and Michael Kennedy's exhaustive look at the Jacobin clubs and their circulars complete the view of the atmosphere of a direct Thermidorian Reaction for decrees disadvantaging the Jacobins and their supporters while favouring well-to-do citizens showed the true potential of a new, purged and cleansed Convention – to find scapegoats, eliminate political enemies and distract France from real struggles.

When French had found out they didn't need a repressive regime because they were winning against enemy, the Jacobin era must have come to an end. The so-called *coup d'état* deprived twenty-two prominent Jacobins – including infamous Maximilien de Robespierre, Louis de Sant-Just and Georges Couthon – of their rule over France. The day after, on 10 Thermidor Year II or 28th July 1794, the power in country shifted to extremists who "*feared of retreating from the Terror*", to moderates who wanted to "*foster that retreat*" and to disgraced deputies who "*hoped to protect themselves*" (Mason 2013, p. 315).

The following period of 15 months had been in hands of "*corrupted politicians, people without scruples and means*" (Furet 1996, p. 225) who were even further regicides and took part in previous terrorist actions. France was governed by the Committee of Public Safety, leading figures were Jean-Baptiste Tallien and Paul Barras who had both gained an immense power and influence in the country. Tallien's wife Thérésa was the main figure in organizing "balls for victims" and salons, Louis-Marie Fréron was considered as the chief of journalists.

A new era of Thermidorians – also called *Perpétuels* for they survived both the Girondin purge in May – June 1793 and that of June 1794 – put an end to the Laws of Maximum and of 22 Prairial. Furthermore, they eliminated the Revolutionary tribunal (Shusterman 2014, p. 235). Their rule was, however, a "*victory of mediocrity over talent*" (Shusterman 2014, p. 237) and the reign was famed for an aforementioned "*corruption, extravagance and revenge*" (Mason 2015, p. 1). The victorious men "*advanced the Montagnard project of a consolidated state while, paradoxically, destroyed the Mountain itself*" (Mason 2013, p. 314) and were cautious in not inviting royalists or Jacobins to seize control (Connelly 2006, p. 68).

News concerning the fall of the triumvirate reached the surroundings of Paris on 29th or 30th July, southern cities and villages were informed between 3rd and 5th August (Kennedy 1989, p. 309), a week later. When the Medusa's head was cut off there were still thousands of parts that needed to be dealt with. As Mary Miller says, the Jacobin volcano was in 1793 "*bursting passions set ablaze by the sudden appearance of a great Republic*" but for Thermidorians in autumn 1794 they represented dangerous, overzealous revolutionaries

who could ignite the fragile Republic (Miller 2011, p. 162). That's why Jacobins were the first on the list.

As Mette Harder claims, the *coup's* purge of the triumvirate was followed by purge of another ninety-nine partisans (Harder 2015, p. 34) from outside the Convention who were guillotined with their leaders. It is unrealistic to think that with the end of the Terror all the violence and murders would have suddenly stopped. Thermidorians not only expelled and arrested the Incorruptible's closest allies, but also former members of the previous government, majority of remaining Montagnard and Jacobin deputies and finally several right-leaning members (Harder 2015, p. 35).

Endangered were of course the Terrorists themselves for "*the ex-prisoners thirsted for vengeance against them*" (Kennedy 1989, p. 313). Some of them, like artful Joseph Fouché, could have washed off their allegiance to Robespierre but most of them couldn't. Jean-Baptiste Carrier, infamous representant on mission in Nantes, was executed in December. Bertrand Barère, Jacques Billaud-Varenne, Collot d'Herbois and Marc Vadier were accused of being the right hand of Robespierre and were in April 1795 deported to French Guyana (Shusterman 2014, p. 236; Harder, 2015, pp. 37–38). On the contrary, the Girondins, such as Jean-Baptiste Louvet, Maximin Isnard or Jean Lanjuinais, had been reinstated in their positions again and families of purged deputies were paid state pensions (Shusterman 2014, pp. 236–237; Harder 2015, p. 41).

Jean-Baptiste Carrier's trial is worth mentioning. Indignation of the people broke out after 9 Thermidor when 133 citizens of Nantes described his "*republican marriages*" in which he had tied up a naked man with a naked woman and drowned them together. He had been arrested and nearly freed like Robespierre, but Carrier in the end stood before the tribunal. In his final speech, he declared that "*everyone is guilty here, up to the bell of the president*" (Thiers 1839, pp. 370–374). The general panic developed and Carrier was quickly, with his fellows of the Nantes' revolutionary committee, sent to death.

Not only Jacobins, but also their supporters sans-culottes needed to be swept away. Sans-culottes referred to a miserable group of labourers who wore short trousers (*culottes*) to differentiate themselves from non-working nobles with long trousers. A new social group had emerged against them – four or five hundred of the rich gilded youth "*flaunted their wealth, insulted sans-culottes and attacked ex-Terrorists*" (Connelly 2006, p. 68; Mason 2013, p. 318; Palmer 2014, pp. 531–532) while also physically attacking the Parisian Jacobin club and beating up people inside the building (Shusterman 2014, p. 237). The sans-culottes in municipalities were – altogether with merchants, artisans and petty property owners – replaced by former nobles, federalists and affluent landowners (Miller 2008, p. 244). For example in Languedoc's municipal councils landlords, jurists or lawyers had replaced the artisans and shopkeepers (Miller 2008, pp. 245–247).

Furthermore, the Convention "*purged 81 legislators and incarcerated them,*" it "*deported two former members to a prison colony in French Guyana, sent to death 6 deputies*" and "*drove at least five into suicide*" (Harder 2015, p. 35). Harder summarizes that 230 of 749 deputies of the Convention were arrested throughout years 1793 and 1795 and points out

that all purges were motivated to "*favor the public opinion in expelling unpopular members*" (Harder 2015, pp. 36, 43). Stephen Miller agrees and rightly states that the "restored" Thermidorian Convention in no case stopped purging its unsuitable members and was even more active than its Jacobin predecessor (Miller 2008, p. 28).

On the other hand, the new Convention differed from previous one in permitting religious opinions, but it forbade showing it in public assemblies. That's why the people of northern Seine-Inférieure shifted from celebrating the *fêtes décadaires* on workdays to celebrate them on Sundays in church (Sirich 1954, p. 335). When the citizens of eastern region of Côte d'Or were deprived of singing Masses and vespers in the church, the people rose up and summoned others to sing it by themselves. Similar accident happened in south-eastern region of Isère: women had marched to home of the national agent and "*forced him to hand over the keys of the church in order that Mass could be said*" (Sirich 1954, p. 335).

The new government soon regretted abolishing the Maximum. Since the Law was establishing price controls for "*items like meat, writing paper or workers' wage*" (Shusterman 2014, p. 196), price of bread was continually growing and workers couldn't afford buying it – especially when the *assignats* were "floating" and therefore became worthless (Connelly 2006, p. 69). In addition, a terrible winter that "*froze the Seine and suspended grain transports*" made inflation possible so the working class was starving while "*high society danced on the tomb of Jacobin austerity*" (Mason 2013, p. 319). When the Maximum was violated in the départements, 4 persons were arrested or the local committee with gendarmerie made an expedition to certain commune which had "*refused to satisfy requisitions*" (Sirich 1954, p. 334).

The suspension of the Jacobin clubs

Once the Convention had made sure it got rid of sans-culottes and was controlling all citizens who would deliver its power to distant places in France, it focused on popular clubs and public life. Jacobin clubs split in two groups: (1) one was strictly against the Convention depriving country of the "lawful" ruler while (2) the second "*felicitated the Convention on saving the fatherland again*" (Kennedy 1989, p. 310). Knowing that it will be their turn to be beaten up, discredited or possibly killed like they were organizing, the Jacobins began to either turn their coats or act like they serve the country no matter who was in power.

There were some clubs, however, who opposed the overall upheaval. The Chambéry club in Savoy warned about "*moderates wanting to substitute, indulgence' and sowing troubles in the departments*" (Kennedy 1989, p. 314) while the Marseille club was against "*freeing of the aristocrats and the persecution of patriots*" (Kennedy 1989, p. 314). However, neither of them could have not withstood the reaction and were successively dissolved on 24th August and 21th September 1794 (Aulard 1910, p. 230; Kennedy 1989, pp. 320–321).

The most radical was Dijon club – it declared incarceration of those who were pointed out as suspects plus it wanted to remove priests and nobles from public offices (Kennedy

1989, p. 315). It went even further – it had imprisoned all voyagers or habitants *"who had signed on the list that would bring the emigrants into the city"* (Thiers 1839, p. 333). Local representative on mission had commonly chose twenty to thirty moderate members, installed them in a certain Jacobin club and instructed his fellows to purge the remaining radical Jacobins (Thiers 1839, p. 333). The Dijon purge culminated on 31st October (Kennedy 1989, p. 342) and the society club in Paris lost one of her most loyal supporter.

The Jacobins' fate at Lyon and Marseille was similar. Since they were *"chased in municipalities and provinces, they retired to the Jacobin club"* (Thiers 1839, p. 334). There was a chance they would form another society so they needed to be eliminated. Lyon's orators were attacking the Convention decrees concerning freeing imprisoned "suspects" and therefore were dissolved by the representant on mission. Marseille had witnessed gathering of a considerable group of people that surrounded the room of two representants and *"with saber and gun in hand"* demanded liberty for incarcerated Jacobin patriots. Present gendarmes thought the representants guilty and helped the mob to suffocate and kill the two men (Thiers 1839, p. 334). Jacobins at Toulouse had organized riots, too, but were soon imprisoned (Thiers 1839, p. 335).

Similar activities had occurred in numerous clubs and committees where Jacobins still held power but the clubs' lives were slowly evaporating. Although these remote clubs still existed, they were prohibited from *"associating with one another or engaging further in local politics"* so they simply lost their purpose and ceased to exist in the summer of 1795 (Mason 2013, p. 318) when they were dissolved.

The Parisian mother club stood alone and was purified. Two days after the *coup* the *"aristocrats had rushed to publish that the Jacobins were closed and would not be reopened"* (Aulard 1897, p. 295) which occurred at the turn of the month – on 31th July there was the last session, the club reopened on 3rd August. Presiding Louis Legendre had appealed to some Jacobins' consciences and threatened to *"grab the keys, leave them to the National Convention and keep the club closed"* until only true Jacobins come back because the club will be *"forever closed for conspirators"* (Aulard 1897, p. 297).

Jacobins were completely expelled from all areas and were called *"cannibals, partisans, accomplices and successors of Robespierre"* (Thiers 1839, p. 335). Pointless were their shouts against Thermidorians destroying their nation, against *"the aristocracy and the moderantism raising a daring head"* (Thiers 1839, p. 336). They didn't show up neither in theatres nor in salons and were excluded from all public life with their wives, mockingly called the *"furies of the guillotine"* (Thiers 1839, p. 342) for they had surrounded the scaffold throughout the Revolution.

However, Jacobins' doom was near. Bourdon de l'Oise cried that the popular societies consisted of *"men who were choosing only themselves, like monkeys,"* that the representation which rules together with the Convention *"sits at the Jacobin's club"* and therefore it must be dealt with (Thiers 1839, p. 354). The session of 22 Brumaire, or 12th November, sealed their fate – the four Committees charged one of the Jacobin to read out their motives why the Parisian club should be dissolved: the popular societies didn't

govern anything and they weren't deliberating no issues, their public functions were prohibited and – maybe the most important of all – none society was superior or had more power than other society (Aulard 1897, pp. 674, 680–681).

Talking about not having two different attitudes in the Convention, the representatives were requested to punish the Jacobins because *"if there are two parties, the Republic isn't united and neither is the Convention"* (Aulard 1897, p. 675). For maintaining the public tranquility their removal was essential even though it was not political, but *"it's necessary for the people's safety, so I support it"* said Ernest Duquesnoy (Aulard 1897, p. 676). The first article of 21 Brumaire, or 11th November, declared the Society of Jacobins suspended, its building transformed into a storehouse for weapons and its keys be given to the Committee of the General Security (Aulard 1897, pp. 677, 680).

Situation in departements

The second civil war in the south was slowly evolving although royalists, emigrés and the clergy weren't endorsed by the regime. In the department of Ariège members of the revolutionary army humiliated the priests and wealthy citizens and tried to *"inspire fear in the local population"* (Aulard, 1911, p. 96; Miller 2008, p. 249). They had continued with Jacobins' politics – cleansing local administrations and installing real patriots were supported by the Convention for it was looking for *"demeanour, dedication and ability to manipulate assemblies"* (Miller 2008, p. 250) that perfectly fit those militant people. We can then assume that these erstwhile soldiers had served for the same purpose as in 1793 and the first half of 1794: as a reaching hand of the government, they were useful tool to eliminate enemies far from the capital and those citizens who would dare to oppose the then course of the Revolution. The centralization was still on the agenda.

The atmosphere of omnipresent fear declared by the Law of Suspects in September 1793 was swept away by the law from 5th August: massive releasing of "suspects" affected towns with populations less than twelve hundred (Duvergier 1845, p. 216) and local clubs were forced to free even more prisoners because they were *"excellent patriots"* (Aulard 1897, p. 308). Some of those "patriots" were – by annulling preceding laws – welcomed back in Paris and 17 dismissed people were given three hundred livres each. Many French had been either freed of their accusation or released from prisons whereas most of the then members of municipalities were arrested and imprisoned (Aulard, 1911, p. 412; Duvergier 1845, pp. 238–241, 245–246, 248 and 265–266).

The clubs had also been ordered to let supporters of the Girondins and the Girondins themselves out and to fill prisons with political enemies and scapegoats. No wonder that prison massacres soon occurred. One of them, in southern Gard department, was justified that *"nothing has been spared to assure these execrable crimes a scandalous and reprehensible impunity"* (Miller 2008, p. 248), while the other one was filled with terrorists who had been disarmed and their *"weapons handed over to the good citizens summoned to assure the execution of the law"* (Sirich 1954, p. 338).

A quiet destroying of less-earning social groups suddenly evolved in départements. Despite the sans-culottes' dismal financial situation – or maybe because of it – new local administrators deliberately allowed inflation and declined to fix prices which resulted in many petty-bourgeois quickly sinking into groups of merchants or day labourers. Furthermore, many overlooked professions (e.g. clerks, farmers) wanted an esteemed position so much they *"accused one another of debauchery, sexual perversity and unspeakable acts of cruelty"* (Miller 2008, p. 251–252).

After the main nerve of the Jacobin era had been in turmoil and later cut off, jacobinism survived and was present all over the country. Members of the Committees of Public Safety, General Security and Revolutionary committees were considered as conspirators so the institutions were to be reorganized. According to the law of 24th August 1794, its articles *"suppressed all committees save those in district capitals"* and in *"communes of more than eight thousands inhabitants"* and chose people who were eligible to write and read (Sirich 1954, p. 329) by which the law eliminated low-class people.

Provincial revolutionary committees had been closely cooperating with communes of certain districts and the communes' agents ought to *"report all information that would tend to trouble public order or delay the progress of the revolution"* (Sirich 1954, p. 330). Suspects were then questioned and given a copy of the charges against them. What is surprising, citizens were not eager, in many cases, to join the infamous committees – some of the committees threatened the citizens (whom they had named before) to accept the positions otherwise they would be *"regarded as suspect and treated as such"* (Sirich 1954, p. 331).

Concerning the committees' organization, they always consisted of 12 people. In most cases half of the citizens were chosen from the city and half from the country, some committees included members of the previous terrorist committees (Sirich 1954, p. 331). Duties of each organization were as follows: overseeing the food supply, the public property, the armed forces and the political situation with public opinion (Sirich 1954 p. 332). The government had in no time entrusted them with overseeing hurt soldiers, who returned home, to be sent back to the army right after they recover: the committees' warrants had arrested *"eight delinquent soldiers,"* they *"failed to locate three and discovered one to be dead"* (Sirich 1954, p. 333).

The thorniest issue has been the question of murdering and nearly exterminating all supporters of previous regime. The most threatened were Jacobins, Montagnards, erstwhile terrorists and simply all citizens who contributed and helped to maintain the Terror. The members of revolutionary committees all around country had begun to *"investigate the acts of their Jacobin predecessors"* and denounced their colleagues who were either taken revenge on or were cleansed (Sirich 1954, p. 337). New committees had not only arrested betrayers but also their wives. The Dijon committee arrested a vinegar manufacturer who had declared that Robespierre was a *"brave man"* and had insulted the local representative on mission (Sirich 1954, p. 337). Many raids into small villages and

combing inns, suspicious houses and surrounding forests soon followed (Aulard 1912, p. 728; Sirich 1954, p. 337).

Horrors of 1793 in the south, especially in Lyon and Nantes, had fomented reversed horrors on those who had participated in republican marriages, drowning people or organizing "infernal columns", raids sent to Vendée to slaughter people. The civil war continued no matter who was battling: Jacobins, Montagnards, royalists or *émigrés* still represented one nation and thousands of dead were only to prove that the Republic, as transformed as it was, was still bolstering pointless murders just to take the focus off country's internal problems.

The slaughters of 1793 had consequently "*driven peasants into guerrilla bands*" (Connelly 2006, p. 72) known as *Chouans* (Aulard, 1911, p. 338). General Lazare Hoche soon suppressed the Vendée uprising and even concluded a peace with their leader François de Charette in February 1795 (Connelly 2006, p. 72). Discords were, however, not solved and more united group named *Companion of Jehu* has been from April 1795 massacring Jacobins in the Vendée region. Although the exact number of dead couldn't be specified, it is believed that several hundreds victims succumbed to royalists' blades (Aulard 1897, 1911; Blanc 1870; Thiers 1839).

When the British had supported the royal cause in France and helped 4 500 *émigrés* to land in the north, royalists with help of 15 000 Chouan reinforcements tried to turn the tide of battle. More than 8 000 of them were captured, 748 of *émigrés* sent to death (Connelly, 2016, pp. 72-73) and a considerable amount of them freed. However this act of mercy didn't win Tallien more respect than he had at the time and his reign was coming to an end. Paul Barras replaced him in October 1795 and royalists once more believed they could seize the Convention. But they were proved wrong when young Brigadier General Napoleon Bonaparte blew their masses up and helped to establish a new regime that ended the Revolution.

Conclusion

Historians describe with enthusiasm Robespierre's fall and the aftermath of his execution. However they have mostly studied only the *closest* aftermath and the whole period of 15 months of an unstabled regime wasn't thoroughly examined. The aim of this article was to clarify the Jacobin's fate after they lost power and how they were hunted and eliminated not only from political, but also from cultural and social life alike.

A new era of Thermidorians, an odd alliance of moderate and indecisive group of representants, took care of liquidating all pro-Jacobin and pro-Montagnard citizens. They began with their colleagues: up to 90 representants had been purged from the Convention, imprisoned or deported from France. This included infamous ex-Terrorists like Jean-Baptiste Carrier or Jacques-Billaud Varenne. We found out that remaining men cleansed their ranks to favor the public opinion but somehow neglected to remove also Jean-Baptiste Tallien and Paul Barras who were the right hand of Robespierre and voted for him every month to stay in the Committee of Public Safety.

Tallien husbands became a driving force of the Reaction. While her spouse was dealing with Jacobins in a more cruel way, Thérèse Tallien was organizing "balls for victims", theatres and salons from which Jacobins were expelled. Their expulsion was completed by a chief journalist Louis-Marie Fréron who had publicly accused Jacobins of their crimes and even listed their names in his newspapers *Orateur du Peuple* to hunt them down.

The leaders knew they could not completely eliminate Jacobins from functioning until they destroy their nests, clubs all around the country. The staunchest were those of Dijon, Marseille and Lyon. The Dijon club had managed to preserve its Jacobins and to intimidate others as well as the Lyon's. The Marseille club went even further and killed two representants of the Convention while demanding freedom for arrested Jacobins. Since the clubs were closely cooperating with revolutionary committees, both institutions were slowly suspended, reorganized and clubs completely dissolved in 1795.

Once the Parisian headquarters of the Jacobins was gone, it was sans-culottes' turn to be repressed. In Paris, they had been attacked by the gilded youth, children of wealthy citizens, whereas in départements they were disadvantaged and their ranks were expanding for well-to-do citizens sank among them because of inflation. Sans-culottes were replaced by wealthier people and many of them were imprisoned. Furthermore, cruel winter of 1794/1795 and high prices had caused dissatisfaction and a shortage of bread which resulted in uprisings that were drown in blood because the Thermidorians considered them as Jacobins' actions.

As soon as the main threats were eliminated, various citizens took care of remaining Jacobins and ex-Terrorists by themselves without a notion from the Convention. Decrees freed alleged suspects and incarcerated the Jacobins with their supporters which resulted in cruel prison massacres— surviving citizens had no mercy with their erstwhile local rulers and mass murders occurred at many places across France. If they hadn't found a supporter of the Jacobin regime, they killed scapegoats instead.

Although the Thermidorians had dissociated themselves from the Jacobin era, we could see a continuation in its steps. The Thermidorians had excluded ex-Jacobins from the Convention like Montagnards did with the Girondins. Fréron presented regime's opinions like Jean-Paul Marat did. The Jacobins were split in deciding whether to join the moderates or to stay loyal to jacobinism – as citizens, whose families' members diminished due to wilfulnesses of the representants on mission, didn't differentiate between a Jacobin or a non-Jacobin, the matter of faction wasn't really important.

The regime tried to remove its connection to the previous era and by choosing victims it was only a matter of time when citizens will take up arms and will do the dirty job for the Convention that was as unstable as the French's emotions. The purged Convention hadn't however changed and used the citizens' rage, caused by the representants' incompetence to distribute rations, to eliminate its enemies and distract the people from real difficulties.

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